

Angels in Early Christian Grave Inscriptions

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Angels are only rarely mentioned in early Christian grave inscriptions. When these express ideas on death and beyond they prefer across-the-board expressions referring to the community with God or Christ and to eternal life. In the East of the Roman Empire invocations to God enjoy great popularity. A theme to be found regularly both in the East and West is the community of the saints, although martyrs and specific saints are seldom asked for help and intercession.¹ Considered from this point of view it is not amazing that angels are scarcely found in grave inscriptions.

Inscriptions referring to angels may be divided into three groups regarding their contents: angels and death, angels in the afterlife, and angels and Parousia.² In addition, one grave inscription mentions the dedication of a church to the holy angels.

1. Angels and Death

In reference to death angels appear in different situations. The earliest inscriptions which speak of angels are on grave stelae from the Cyclades island Thera.³ Here 60 inscriptions have been preserved whose formula consists of the word „angel“ with or without the name of the deceased.⁴ These inscriptions are dated in the 3rd century AD because their onomasticon is in accordance with names which were in vogue in Roman Imperial time, and, first and foremost, because three of these inscriptions have been found together with two coins from the 3rd century.⁵ Although the meaning of the inscriptions is clear – angels as guards of the tombs⁶ – different views exist concerning their reli-

1 Examples in Rome: ICUR I 947 = VII 17192; II 5988; VII 17765; 18937 (Laurentius); 19599 (Laurentius); VIII 23015; X 26530. In Italy: Brusin, *Inscriptiones* 2925.

2 The same classification is given by Danielou, *Sendung* 123-146.

3 Kiourtzian, *Recueil* 247-282.

4 Kiourtzian, *Recueil* 248.

5 Kiourtzian, *Recueil* 275-276.

6 Kiourtzian, *Recueil* 276.

gious affiliation. They have been attributed both to pagans and to Christians; only Judaism can be excluded because the stelae do not show any Jewish symbol.⁷ Against a pagan and in favour of a Christian context an inscription testifies which mentions a woman denominated *περεσβυτις*,⁸ but it is a surprise when they are interpreted as Christian that only an angel and not Christ is addressed in the texts. The belief in angels the inscriptions express can probably be associated with a heterodox Christianity, as G. Kiourtzian proposed, or rather with influences which, also originating in paganism,⁹ developed in lately converted communities. In his *Panarion* Epiphanius of Salamis¹⁰ mentions a sect known as Angelics which in the time Epiphanius was writing had just ceased to exist. Epiphanius says that he knows only the name of this sect and is not informed whence it got its name; of course, he is also unacquainted with the localisation of the sect and with its cultural customs¹¹.

All other grave inscriptions which mention angels have been written from the 4th century onwards and are unsuggestive of indications on heterodox circles. In a Roman inscription from the catacomb of St. Laurentius and Cyriaca respectively which refers to a dead woman, angels undertake the task of abducting the woman from life with „[r]apta ab angeli[s]“. ¹² The role of the angels is less aggressive in an inscription from the catacombs of St. Callixt where the four-year-old boy Laurentius is summoned by them, „accersitus ab angelis“¹³. Unfortunately, the exact location of the inscriptions which could lead to a more exact datation, is unknown, but as the Roman catacombs are used most frequently during the 4th century for burial, it is probable that they have been written in the course of this century.

Other epigraphical texts broach the issue of the custody of the grave. An inscription from a catacomb on the island of Melos¹⁴ asks the reader in the name of the angel who is lingering at the grave not to

7 Kiourtzian, Recueil 277.

8 Kiourtzian, Recueil 263 Nr.43.

9 Examples for angels in pagan grave inscriptions: AE 1905, 155, from Viminacium (Serbia), dated to the late 2nd or early 3rd century AD, see N. Vulić, *JbÖAI* (Beiblatt) 8, 1905, 4 nr. 11 (*Diis An/gelis / M(arcus) Aur(elius) Cel/sus vo/tum posu/it l(ibens) m(erito)*); AE 1914, 106 from Sarmizegetusa (Romania): *Deo Aeterno et Iuno/ni et Angelis / M(arcus) Procilius Aphrodisius Aug(ustalis) col(oniae) metropol(is) / et Seximia Hermione / et Procilia filia / colitoribus d(ono) d(ederunt) p(osuerunt)*.

10 PG 41, Sp.1037-1040. Williams, *Panarion* 113-114.

11 Kiourtzian, Recueil 277-279.

12 ICUR VII 18212.

13 ICUR III 9155.

14 DACL I 2 (1924) 2144.

attempt any other sepulture there. The inscription may be dated to the 4th century and is dedicated to seven persons, a priest among them.¹⁵ Another inscription in Larisa (Thessaly) asks the angel hovering above the grave of the presbyter Thersinos to care for an undisturbed repose in the grave.¹⁶ In Greece Christian inscriptions are generally found in a greater number since the 4th century, so that a dating to this century or perhaps later may be suggested.

Angels in grave inscriptions also act as helpers of the deceased. In an inscription found in a family grave in Alexandria, Egypt, and dated to the year 409, God is adjured to accept that his servant Zoneïne shall be deemed worthy to be well received in the bosom of the holy fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, with the help of the holy, to the light leading archangel Michael.¹⁷ At the same time, this inscription is an important example for the archangel Michael's role as Psychopompos,¹⁸ which later is recorded in the offertory of the Roman mass for the dead.

From Edessa in Macedone (Greece) originates the meanwhile lost inscription of the presbyter Kyprianos which was written in the 5th or the 6th century.¹⁹ He prays to God for mercy through the intercession of „all holy angels, prophets, apostles, and martyrs who have pleased you since the foundation of the cosmos.“ For such an all-embracing nomination of possible auxiliaries there is no parallel in the Early Christian inscriptions known to me. They suggest a pronounced awareness of sin and transgression on the part of the deceased presbyter.

2. Angels in Afterlife

The inscription of Iulia Evaresta refers to the presence of angels in afterlife. It originates from a cemetery from the Via Latina in Rome and is dated to the 4th century AD.²⁰ It relates that the soul of the dead was renewed by the spirit of Christ, took an angelic body and was admitted to the heavenly realm with Christ and the saints.

At a similar condition has arrived the deacon Crescentius who stays near the angels. In the mosaic inscription preserved in Tabarka (Tunisia) he is called „angelorum oспes, martyrum comes“. On the basis of the

15 Flocchi Nicolai / Hesberg / Ristow, Katakombe 412.

16 IG IX 2, 991.

17 Lefebvre, Recueil 49; Kaufmann, Handbuch 145.

18 Saxer, Michel 372-373. Saxer cites the text of the offertory: *sed signifer sanctus Michael representet eas in lucem sanctam.*

19 Feissel, Recueil 15 Pl. 4.

20 Ferrua, Questioni 165-167.

style of the images represented in the mosaic, a date between 350 und 450 is attributed to the inscription.²¹ Praesidius who presided over an unknown convent in Gaule gleams in the choir of the angels as his grave epigram written by Venantius Fortunatus in the second half of the 6th century AD reports.²²

The inscription of Hilarius, bishop of Arles, who died in 449, evolves a comprehensive scene of his heavenly whereabouts. Hilarius has entered the houses of the angels and the golden realms²³ („angelicas domus intrauit et aurea regna“). As the „houses of the angels“ cannot be found in other inscriptions it stands to reason to search an explanation either in Hilarius himself or in his environment. Maybe the „houses of the angels“ can be understood as a reference to the monastic life, namely the cells of the monks, in which they are leading an angelic existence already.²⁴ As Hilarius intensively encouraged monastic life this hypothesis could provide an explanation. Next to the house of the angels Hilarius sees the opulences of paradise, its always sweet smelling grass, its flavoursome gardens with divine Flowers, the clouds under his feet and the stars of heavens („diuitias, paradise, tuas flagrantia semper gramina et halentes diuinis floribus hortos subiectasque uidet nubes et sidera caeli“).

Less exactly defined are the whereabouts of the midwife Susanna whose inscription was found in Athens and dates to the 5th or 6th century. It reports that the deceased resides „close to the angels“.²⁵

As a curiosity a curse inscription, found in Rome and inspired by Christian conceptions, should be mentioned.²⁶ Among the curses is the wish that the holy angels shall keep the soul forever in the nether world, that it shall see no light and not obtain the „refrigerium.“ The mentioning of the *refrigerium* is indicative of a dating to the 3rd or 4th century, because this occurs frequently in the inscriptions of this period.

21 Merlin, *Inscriptions* 1688 ; Duval, *Mosaïques* 64 fig.33, 130; Mandouze, *Prosopographie* 277; Duval, *Loca* 431 fig.281, 505-506.

22 Ven. Fort. IV 14.

23 Le Blant, *Recueil* II 516 fig.419; Heinzelmann, *Bischofsherrschaft* 84-94; Guyon / Heijmans, *Monde* 210 nr.28.

24 I am grateful to Andreas Merkt, Regensburg, for this information.

25 Sironen, *Inscriptions* 45. – In an inscriptions on a sarcophagus in Salona (Croatia), Egger, *Friedhof* 98 nr.200, amends the text as follows: *Arca I[o]hanni s(a)r(t)ori et T[it]ia[e iuga/li eius// [- -]a cum an[gelis?]*.

26 AE 1941, 138; Dresken-Weiland, *Vorstellungen* 296.

3. Angels and Parousia

Only rarely angels are mentioned in the context of the Last Judgement. They are mentioned indirectly when speaking about trumpets of the Final Judgement,²⁷ as do inscriptions in Rome,²⁸ Khirbet ed-Deir (Palestine)²⁹ and Laodikea Katakekaumene (Pisidia).³⁰

A painted inscription in the church of Theodor in the valley of Ürgüp in Cappadocia shares the difficulties of a chronological classification with the paintings of this whole church which may already belong to the Early Middle Ages.³¹ The inscription is mounted above the tomb of the monk John: „I pray you, beloved brothers, by the Lord and the archangels, not to open my sepulchre until the parousia of our Lord and saviour. He will come with myriads of archangels and angels, as soon as Michael und Gabriel have announced the resurrection of the dead (with the trumpet).“³²

The bond between angels and parousia is expressed in a grave decorated with painting in Sofia (south Bulgaria) which can be dated to the second half of the 4th or to the early 5th century. It shows on the ceiling a great cross decorated with pearls and surrounded by a laurel wreath, and in the corners the busts of the archangels Rafael und Uriel; the busts of Michael and Gabriel are lost, but are reproduced on a drawing.³³

4. Church Dedications for Angels

The last theme to be considered in the context of grave inscriptions mentioning angels are donations of churches dedicated to angels. Donations of churches are generally referred to in inscriptions which are accessible in public³⁴ and therefore are only rarely found in sepulchral

27 They are mentioned in Matt 24:31; an allusion is 1Cor 15:52. For trumpets in Early Christian patristic texts see e.g. Cyrill of Jerusalem, *Catech.* 15,22.

28 ICUR VII 18017, from the early 5th century AD.

29 SEG 37, 1987, 1495. The text concerns a mosaic inscription in the vestibule of a rock grave, dated to 514-553 (?) and belonging to a monastery.

30 MAMA I 226 with ill.; Merkelbach / Stauber, *Steinepigramme* III, 88. Like nearly all inscriptions from Laodikea, this inscription probably belongs to the 3rd or 4th century.

31 For the problems of dating of the Cappadocian painting see Restle, *Kappadokien*.

32 Jerphanion, *Églises* 19-20. Nr.127; Weißbrod, *Knecht* 240-241.

33 Pillinger / Popova / Zimmermann, *Corpus* 68-72 Pl. 70-71.

34 In 5/6th century Perugia Memmius Sallustius Saluinus Dianius, *uir spectabilis*, donates a church dedicated to the angels. See: DACL I 2 2148, and Pietri, *Prosopographie* 559 s.v. Dianius (5/6th century).

texts. In Gaul, where epigraphy attaches importance to the exhibition of merits, the beneficence of a church dedicated to the holy angels appears in the epitaph of Carathena, the wife of Gundobadus, queen of the Burgundians³⁵ among her treasury of merits.³⁶

Conclusion

Early Christian grave inscriptions rarely deal with angels. Remarkably the texts which speak about them are almost all composed by theologically erudited and educated persons. This leads to the assumption that angels were irrelevant for the average Christian in a sepulchral context, although churches and oratories are dedicated to the archangels from the early 5th century onwards so they definitively were venerated.³⁷ The lack of interest in angels in a funeral context is also demonstrated by the absence of images which show them as guardians on tombs or as psychopompos³⁸ although written texts mention them in these functions.³⁹ Only in a pagan context, namely in the hypogaeum of Vincentius and Vibia, a priest and a devotee of the cult of Sabazios, we find the dead Vibia in the company of an „angelus bonus“ arriving at a meadow where a symposion's company is awaiting her.⁴⁰

35 Heinzelmänn, Prosopographie 574.

36 Ven. Fort. IV 14, Le Blant, Recueil I 31; Lyon, not conserved, known from a manuscript and dated to the year 506.

37 Saxer, Jalons 371-372. See the churches S. Michele in Affricisco in Ravenna (Italy) and the Michaelion in Huarte (Syria): Canivet, Huarte.

38 See Giuliani, Angelo; Arbeiter, Entwicklung.

39 See for instance the prayer of Macrina on her deathbed who wishes to be accompanied by an light-bearing angel, Vita Macrinae 34,26. Further examples in liturgical texts and in the life of saints in Recheis, Engel 135.

40 See Pergola / Barbini, Catacombe 177-180 with bibl.; for the cult of Sabazius, see Turcan, Cultes 320-322. The pictures are dated to ca. 350 AD.

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